

Another Year, Another Pledge to Lose Weight

It's that time of year again, and the director of Arizona's Department of Health Services reminds us that you don't need a gym to keep that annual resolution.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, a group of state employees faithfully gathers in front of the Arizona Department of Health Services building for a weekly ritual. They are epidemiologists, accountants, and computer programmers. And they have one thing in common: a strong desire to walk for a healthier Arizona—and possibly to save their lives.

When I started the Director's Challenge walking program nearly five years ago, it signaled the beginning of an effort to turn the tide against obesity in Arizona. Let's face it—we have a serious public health crisis on our hands. Our eating habits and our lack of physical activity are literally killing us.

In the last decade, the proportion of people in Arizona who are obese has doubled to about 20 percent of all adults. More than half the deaths in Arizona last year were from chronic illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, for which being overweight is a known risk factor.

Obesity is a problem that affects all ages, races, and demographic groups in Arizona:

- 57 percent of adults are overweight.
- 24 percent of low-income kids ages 2-5 are overweight or at risk of being so.
- 24 percent of high school students are overweight or at risk of being so.
- the obesity rate among adults is up 80 percent from 1990.

- Mesa ranks 12th among U.S. cities with the highest rankings of obesity, and Phoenix ranks 18th.
- Arizona has the 40th highest level of adult obesity in the nation at 20.1 percent.
- In 2003, Arizona spent an estimated \$135 per person on medical costs related to obesity, the 51st highest in the nation.

There is a simple solution, though it's easier said than done: eat well and exercise.

We know that moderate physical activity can substantially reduce the risk of developing heart disease, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, and high blood pressure.

The good news is that we don't need fad diets or high-priced gym equipment to make a difference. A recent *USA Today* story said it all: "If you want to get more exercise, just going for walks can be as beneficial as a gym membership." It drew this conclusion from new studies presented in November at the annual meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Obesity.

That's why the Arizona Department of Health Services is taking a new approach to fitness by promoting physical activity—without the need to run a marathon or join a fancy health club. People need to be active in all parts of their lives, whether it's going for a walk or playing with your children.

As clichéd as it sounds, a healthy lifestyle can start with something as simple as taking the stairs instead of the elevator at work.

Or pack a healthy lunch instead of pick-

ing up calorie-laden fast food.

Or have a bottle of water instead of a can of soda.

When I arrived at the department in May 2000, I made healthy living and disease prevention a cornerstone priority for our agency.

In fact, pedometers have become something of a fashion statement at the office. My Deputy Director, Danny Valenzuela, proudly wears one with an Arizona State University logo on it and frequently gives us an update on how many steps he's taken.

We're also working on initiatives to reduce chronic disease and obesity in adults and children.

In 2004, Governor Janet Napolitano spearheaded a call to action on childhood obesity in Arizona. In February, the Department's Obesity Prevention Program will unveil a state plan to combat staggering increases in childhood obesity rates and related health problems such as diabetes.

We've started an advertising campaign targeting children with a fun character called Bobby B. Well, who stresses the importance of being active and eating healthy. You can read more at www.eatwellbewell.org.

Our goal is to get children—and their parents—to turn off the TV, put down the video games, and go outside and play.

We all can take small steps to make a change—and to turn the tide against obesity.

Catherine Eden is the director of Arizona's Department of Health Services.

Editor's Note: In Perspective, Arizona Monthly invites an Arizonan to share his or her views on an issue or subject that affects us all. We intend to make this section balanced, provocative, and considerate. This is a forum for ideas and opinions and is meant to encourage Arizonans to join in a conversation about our state and the direction it is heading. Please address letters in response to this section to info@arizonamonthly.com.